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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses vocationalism versus a utilitarian view of the university in the context of funding and inclusion of pre-professional writing courses in a liberal arts education. It begins by describing a situation in which pre-professional writing courses for medicine, law, and business might be eliminated, based on their vocational specialization and their cost. It then reviews the goals of a liberal arts education: teaching students to think and reason; to compare, discriminate, and analyze; to refine taste; and to sharpen mental vision. The paper continues by applying these goals through each of the three writing courses. It concludes that the entire university curriculum can be seen as vocational, in that the university is a profitable degree-selling business, and that the professional writing course is in fact both useful and enlightening and thus a true liberal art. (EF)

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by Susan Griffin

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Resisting Vocationalism in the Pre-Professional Writing Course

Here's my favorite "Let them eat cake" story, in which our Dean offers the equivalent of Marie Antoinette's famous line. We're in a meeting, the faculty of our Writing Programs, none of us tenured, although many of us have been there for years. The Dean is with us to explain that the Humanities Division is short of money, as usual, and some of our courses may be cut. The courses that the Dean has in mind are the131 series, advanced writing courses that are pre-professional for law, medicine and business. The previous Dean had objected to the same courses as too vocational. In response, we had renamed them. They had been called Advanced Exposition: Pre-Law, Pre-Health Care and Business. We dropped the "pre-," with its tang of preparatory work, and christened them Specialized Writing. Then, we expanded their respective scopes in ways we thought would make them seem more like the traditional Humanities courses. Pre-Law became Law and Politics, Pre-Health Care morphed to Medicine and Public Health, and even the blatantly practical business writing course was inflated to Business and Social Policy.

The name change didn't fool anyone, though. Students still wanted the courses for practical reasons. And the new Dean objected again to these courses

as vocational. They prepared students for the professional schools—and that wasn't the job of the Humanities Division, she said. She added a slightly different objection, one that we hadn't foreseen.

"They're not required for any major." Horrors! Empty credits, not needed in any way, except as they counted towards graduation. "But admissions boards of the professional schools are recommending courses just like these," I replied. And they are—pre-meds are supposed to take two writing courses at the upper division. "If we don't offer such courses, our graduates will be at a disadvantage competing for admission to the best law schools and med schools," I concluded triumphantly. The Dean just sniffed. "They don't have these kinds of writing courses at other universities," she argued. "What do they take in other places?" Literature courses, someone suggested. "Well, then, let them take lit."

You might wonder what the significance of this story is, why it was worth getting up early to hear. When I proposed this paper last spring, I focused on the first of the Dean's objections, that these courses were too vocational, and thus not the business of the Humanities Division in which the Writing Programs is housed. It echoed the classic objection to utility, an objection that I imagine writing instructors face frequently. Writing seems inevitably useful, and thus always suspect as a liberal art. Writing related in any way to a future profession is doubly suspect. Now, however, I'm equally uncomfortable with the Dean's second objection, that our pre-professional courses don't fulfill any requirements,

don't help move students towards the degree. And there we have a different sort of argument about utility, in which the classic positions are reversed—that is, our courses are more solidly in the tradition of the liberal arts than the Dean's bottom-line approach to the curriculum.

But first, let's consider what the liberal arts education is supposed to do, in the classic tradition. I'm going to turn to a 19th century description, John Henry Cardinal Newman's *Idea of the University*. Newman had a thorny rhetorical task, at the time. He was trying to persuade the Catholic aristocracy of Ireland that they needed their own Catholic university. In his collected discourses, which make up the book, he has two problems. First, he has to convince the Catholics that a non-denominational education at the proposed public universities will not in fact be a university education. A university is a place in which all fields of knowledge are taught—universal knowledge, as Newman puts it. So Theology, one of the more important sciences, or disciplines, cannot be neglected. The only way to safely include Theology is to found a Catholic university. Then he must convince these parents that a traditional university education in the liberal arts will be useful for their sons, that it will give them the same advantages Oxford and Cambridge have given the sons of the Protestant English.

Newman has a direct answer to the question of utility: a university education is useful because knowledge is an end in itself. The man who's been to the university understands the big picture, or at least parts of it. As Newman puts it, "He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which

it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, . . . "And that apprehension leads in turn to a habit of mind "which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom;. . . " (Newman, 76). Having made that claim, one that my Dean would probably agree with, Newman proceeds to answer the utilitarians of his own time, particularly John Locke, who was the first to object to all this teaching of Latin, that schoolboys would soon forget, all this reading of literature that wouldn't help them in their future business lives. Newman's reply is one that not only my Dean but most of my writing colleagues have made. The liberal arts are good preparation for whatever comes next, we say, whether it's law, medicine, or business. Newman's own list is even more expansive—he covers all the 19th century bases:

> . . . and the man who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze, who has refined his taste, and formed his judgment, and sharpened his mental vision, will not indeed at once be a lawyer, or a pleader, or an orator, or a statesman, or a physician, or a good landlord, or a man of business, or a soldier, or an engineer, or a chemist, or a geologist, or an antiquarian, but he will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any one of the sciences or callings I have referred to, or any other for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger.

> In this sense then, and as yet I have said but a very few words on a large subject, mental culture is emphatically *useful*. (Newman 125)

Newman's vision of the goals of the liberal arts education are of course exactly the ones that we claim for our writing courses, that is, that they will teach students to think and reason, to compare and discriminate and analyze, that they will refine taste (or at least style) and sharpen mental vision. These goals are the same in the required freshman comp course and the advanced writing courses—the only real difference in the pre-professional courses is that the courses are designed to appeal to the interests of students headed for certain professions, and to focus on those skills that they most need to develop. And we advertise our courses as useful for both particular and broader purposes. Yes, freshman comp will help you write your papers for other courses, but it will also make you a more logical thinker, a clearer communicator, and a more reflective person. In the same way, we assure budding lawyers that our Law and Politics course will prove useful when they get to Law School, that it will give them some familiarity with legal materials, and introduce them to legal reasoning. But we also caution them that it's not the equivalent of the legal writing course their law school might require them to take. And then we sell it as liberal arts. It will teach them to think and reason, etc.

In fact, we make the same claims for our other pre-professional courses. I've taught Law and Politics for a decade, Medicine and Public Health for the last five years, and this spring, I'll teach Business and Social Policy for the first time.

My designs for all three courses always have both goals in mind, that is, what the students need as preparation for their future studies in professional schools, and what they need in order to have a truly liberal education, in Newman's terms. I don't really have time to talk in detail about all three, so I'll make a few comments about Medicine and Business, and then turn to Law, where the accusation of vocationalism is most likely to stick.

The course for pre-meds is easy to defend as liberal arts—students are taking it because med schools want candidates with broader backgrounds and better reasoning and writing skills. What is it that most pre-med science majors don't have a chance to develop? Their imaginations, their appreciation of the arts, and their argumentative skills. So I have them read Camus's *The Plague*—it does deal with epidemic disease. They have to imagine Los Angeles in the grip of an epidemic, they have to write a traditional analysis of *The Plague*, and they wind up with an editorial on some important health problem. In a short ten weeks, I do my best to give them opportunities to refine their taste and sharpen their mental vision. And, at the very least, they'll write better MCAT essays, and they can mention a great work of literature in their med school interviews.

My plan in Business is to disappoint the expectations of my students, who will probably be eager to learn about 401(k) plans and how to present budgets. Again, I figure they'll learn how to do all that on the job, and, as the Dean said, it's not our business in the Humanities Division to train them for careers. So I've taken the "Social Policy" part of the course title seriously, and designed a course

that will focus on the business I know best, the Corporate University. Should universities be taking all this corporate money? What happens when they do? We're going to write business documents, of course. One will be a grant proposal to some corporation, asking for support for the student's favorite course at UCLA. The other will be testimony to the California Senate Committee on Higher Education, on the benefits and drawbacks of some particular UC/corporate connection that they've researched. I've even ordered a big business writing handbook for them. But students will quickly understand that this is not the usual business writing course, that I'm more interested in getting them to consider businesses and their own education critically. I want to sharpen their mental vision, of both the world they hope to enter and the one they're already in.

Law presents different problems, simply because legal writing is essentially different from any other kind of writing students have done, either academically or in their everyday lives. It's a bit like snowboarding, or paragliding, I imagine--you can't really get a sense of it from the outside. You have to try it. It's also essentially unlike the professional writing of the other two fields, in that much of the writing doctors and business people do on the job is purely routine. Legal writing isn't—even when it might seem boiler-plate, it addresses individual cases, unique problems, that require analysis and creativity to resolve. Legal writing is already, I would argue, a liberal art. It meets all of Newman's criteria: it teaches us to think and reason, to compare and

discriminate and analyze, to refine our taste, form our judgment and sharpen our mental vision. In my Law and Politics course, we do legal writing. It's unavoidable. So how can I escape the wrath of the Dean? Can I argue that it's not vocational?

Well, I try. I pick issues that seem socially significant: gender, the rights of children, juvenile justice. I include Supreme Court opinions, legal documents but also usually eloquent enough to have rhetorical force for the layperson. I work in short stories, newspaper editorials, histories. But in the end, we turn to that standard of legal education and practice, the appellate opinion, and the paradigmatic legal argument, IRAC: issue, rule, application, conclusion. In the end, students may develop a social conscience about the juvenile justice system. But it's more likely that they'll discover the joy of working with the law itself. "It's so great, the way it all fits together!" they tell me enthusiastically, as they work on their final assignment in my most recent course, a memo on a real case, a California teenager who died at an Arizona boot camp for delinquents in 1998. They get pulled in, they begin to understand the system, and then it happens. The B+ student who's been trudging her way unenthusiastically through the Sociology major, the East LA kid who can't write that paper on *Moby Dick* to save his life, turn in perfectly reasoned legal arguments. They discover they have the knack—they think like lawyers, in a linear, practical, hard-headed, detailed way. They wake up, apply to law school, and go. How can I resist? And should I?

And here's where I stop to consider the Dean's second objection, which I suspect is the more serious one. Our pre-professional writing courses are expendable not because they are too vocational but because they're too expensive. They enroll a mere 20-25 students at a time, compared to the hundreds that could be crammed into the lit. for non-majors courses. And the Dean is absolutely right—they don't fulfill any requirements, for either general ed or the majors. Well, whose fault is that? I want to ask. But I won't. That's too great a tangle to get into, that writing teachers have no tenure, and thus no vote, and thus no ability to designate our courses as a necessary part of the curriculum, however strongly we feel about them. The Dean doesn't want to hear my objections to the messy, self-serving and destructive academic politics of the last 20 years, and there's not much she could do about them, anyway. Only the tenured faculty get to determine what's essential to a university education. Once they've done that, once they've decided that so many credits constitute the English major, so many courses earn one the sociology degree, and this, that and the other general education course will round out the undergraduate experience, what's the Dean's role? To see that the University produces as many degrees as possible in as brief a period of time as possible. That this means that rhetoric, that essential art of the medieval university, is now reduced to a required 10-week course for freshmen, is not her concern.

And this, I would suggest, is the purest form of utilitarianism, in which the liberal arts education becomes a simple exchange of money and time for a

valuable product, the bachelor's degree, the key to solidly middle-class careers. So when we're accused of vocationalism, I'm tempted to offer that old adage about the pot and the kettle. I don't, though. But I do want to consider here the tension created by the two forms of utilitarian education involved in my argument with the Dean, our mutual finger-pointing.

If I had the nerve, and could get the Dean's ear, I might point out that many of the other courses offered in the Humanities Division are arguably as vocational as my legal writing course. After all, what's the point of most of those required lit. courses in the English major? They do give students an appreciation of language and culture, they can certainly sharpen taste. But they're no longer simply the belletristic exercises of the late 18th century. They're designed to produce the scholar, the future candidate for the Ph.D. in English. And if we venture outside the Humanities, to other areas of the Dean's domain in the College of Letters and Sciences, we might see all those science courses our pre-meds are taking as much more purely vocational than the writing course they take from me. Even the Business students, who have to settle for a "specialization" rather than a major, are allowed to focus on Economics as their field of study, without incurring much criticism for being too vocational. We could, in fact, see the whole curriculum as vocational, at this turn of the century—and that change began more than 100 years ago, before the turn of the last century. In his study of the two 19th century rhetoric/writing professors at

Harvard, Paine pinpoints Eliot's inauguration as Harvard President in 1869 as the turning point. It was then, he says, that

> . . . higher education in America would move away from the classical and liberal-arts curriculum, which had been designed for producing gentlemen who would take positions at the bar, the pulpit, and the lectern; it would move toward elective-system and disciplines-oriented curricula, which were designed for producing graduates who could enter an increasingly professionalized world . . . (Paine 126)

Paine points out that Harvard under Eliot paid more attention to its duty to educate a future generation of business leaders—but it didn't entirely abandon the old ideals, the ones that Newman espoused. Harvard's motive, too, was not itself utilitarian—higher education changed in part because the notion of what constituted knowledge was changing, in part because its leaders felt an obligation to produce graduates who could participate actively in public affairs, and offer practical solutions to real social problems. I suppose we should ascribe these same motives to our Dean, when she offers us a cost-benefit analysis of our purely elective writing courses. But somehow, I don't think it's quite the same. There's a deeper sort of utility at work here, one that Paine's 19th century reformers would frown at, I think.

So where does this leave us, in our attempt to resist vocationalism on the one hand, and the purely utilitarian view of the university as a profitable degree-

selling business on the other? Somehow, I think Newman should have the last word. Whenever I design a course from now on, I'll keep in mind the Cardinal's distinction between learning and knowledge. The first is mere acquirement, the collecting of facts, or, to use a modern metaphor, downloading information. But knowledge is an ability to do something with those facts, the power "of sifting out the grains of truth from the mass" (Newman 115). Knowledge isn't easy to come by. You can't get it just by accumulating credit hours. As Newman points out, ". . . it is not mere application, however exemplary, which introduces the mind to truth, nor the reading many books, nor the getting up many subjects, nor the witnessing many experiments, nor the attending many lectures. All this is short of enough; a man may have done it all, yet be lingering in the vestibule of knowledge. . . (114-15). And here, we're on solid ground. Writing necessarily involves doing something with information, making arguments with facts. In my next confrontation with the Dean, I'm going to remember all this. I'm going to defend the professional writing course as both useful and enlightening, a truly liberal art.

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